

# Strategies for Reducing Oral Communication Apprehension in English: A Qualitative Study of Jordanian Undergraduates

Ali Ata Alkhalidi

Liberal Arts Department, American University of the Middle East, Kuwait

Rashad Faleh Alhasan

Translation Dep, Saif Bin Zayed Academy for Police Science and Security, Malaysia

Ibrahim Fathi Huwari

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Zarqa University, Jordan

Hussein Abushaaban

School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

**Abstract**—Speaking is a basic element in acquiring any language. The ability to communicate orally in the English language is the most significant skill, but many second language learners face particular constraints in mastering it. The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about and comprehend Jordanian students' coping mechanisms and strategies for overcoming and reducing their own English language Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA), both inside and outside the classroom, as well as their suggested strategies. A sample of undergraduate students was selected from various programmes at the Hashemite University (HU) in Jordan where English is the medium of instruction. A qualitative research method was used to elicit the students' viewpoints and coping mechanisms with regard to their fear of speaking in English, either with their instructors in class or outside the classroom. The results of this study revealed that undergraduates at HU employed five key coping strategies to manage and reduce oral communication anxiety when speaking in English in or outside of the classroom. These strategies are interpersonal interaction, building self-confidence, practice and preparation, external motivation, and faking it. The results revealed that students confronted with unavoidable communication scenarios adopt self-calming techniques to mitigate the effects of OCA.

**Index Terms**—Hashemite University, Oral Communication Apprehension, undergraduates

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is now thought to be the most widely spoken language. Researchers like (Asassfeh et al., 2011; Hashim, 2020) concur that English is spoken by people of all races, ethnicities and social classes everywhere in the world. The mastery of four key abilities—listening, speaking, reading and writing—is necessary for language acquisition. Speaking is regarded as the most valuable and important of the four English skills, according to researchers (Hajar, 2019; Huwari, 2019; Zughoul & Taminian, 1984; Saed et al., 2021). According to research, the lack of confidence that results from what is perceived as an insufficient degree of English ability creates anxiety in those studying foreign languages (Alrabai, 2017; Huwari & Hashima, 2010). Additionally, anxiety can occur even when a student is around their classmates and teachers while learning English as a foreign language, not just when they are learning it alone. When students are expected to speak English in a classroom context, it frequently causes anxiety (Mahmud, 2018).

In the context of this study, which focused on Jordanian students studying at HU where English language is the medium of instruction, a certain degree of language mastery is required for them to cope with the linguistic demands of their studies. Since Arabic is used as the medium of communication in Jordan, Arabic is the main language of communication in the country for the students. This compels them to possess both communicative and intercultural competence. On the positive side, Jordanian students are expected to gain from their interaction with instructors. However, Jordanian undergraduate students face many challenges. This study examines the methods they use to cope with or reduce the linguistic and academic difficulties arising from OCA.

### Problem statement

Speaking is the process of conveying messages or ideas from one person to another using verbal means in order to make things easier (Raja, 2017). Speaking is an essential skill in life. Speaking, in particular, needs to be learned, trained, focused on and mastered by students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Tridinanti, 2018).

According to Lapkin and Swain (2002), language can be acquired through interactive and meaningful communication in a practical setting. This is because communication serves as a tool in people's social and academic lives. Jordanian university students, like those in any other EFL environment, struggle to become more fluent and communicative in English (Jdetawy, 2011; Hajar, 2019). The issue of OCA among Jordanian undergraduate students has not received sufficient attention from researchers. Little is understood about the problems faced and the coping strategies employed by Jordanian students with regard to the OCA issue. In fact, it is common to observe Jordanian students struggling with OCA when using the English language in an academic context (Alhabahba et al., 2016). The coping mechanisms deployed by students are crucial for enhancing their English language proficiency and competency, which in turn has a huge impact on the students' overall learning experience. As such, this present study looked into students' coping mechanism to address the OCA faced by Jordanian students in HU when attempting to communicate in the English language and the recommended strategies for HU.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Earlier studies on Communication Apprehension (CA) viewed it from the angle of social learning, wherein the present CA understanding has diverged from this stand point and viewed CA from the communibiology paradigm. In the perspective of social learning paradigm, CA denotes behaviour that one learns in early life which can be unlearned via intervention and training (McCroskey, 2009; Meichenbaum, 1977). The communibiological theoretical stance upholds CA as innate and possibly incurable, though sufferers can be assisted using some measures (Hazel et al., 2014). Bragg (2017) summarised the distinction between the social learning and communibiological views of CA. The former advocates CA interventions as a cure, whereby individuals with high CA are capable of receiving treatment, while the latter views it as an aid and perceives CA as a trait. Anyone experiencing it can only be assisted in reducing its lifelong effects.

Since the popularisation of the CA construct (as understood today) by McCroskey in the 1970s, scholars have assessed various related aspects. For instance, studies have looked into CA reasons and treatment (Bodie, 2010), CA experience (Byrne et al., 2012; Bragg, 2017) and the impact of CA on students' performance/achievements. Choi et al. (2015) pointed out that, due to the adverse effects of CA, there has been a growing desire among both academics and professionals to review communication training in the classroom. Researchers have highlighted the need to devise new and suitable pedagogical techniques to overcome CA, besides creating a conducive setting to ensure students do not get affected by high-level CA (Bragg, 2017). According to Bragg (2017), teaching effective communication skills can be beneficial for students to manage their CA in challenging communication situations. Other studies, such as Byrne et al. (2012) and Bragg (2017), have also investigated the impact of CA on students and suggested communication strategies that can help instructors identify different types of CA and their effects. In English public speaking classes, Netta et al. (2020) looked into students' mechanisms for coping with anxiety. The participants included two junior high school students from the English Education Department at Muhammadiyah Aceh University in Indonesia. Qualitative techniques were employed. The results showed that the students employed a range of strategies, including appropriate practice and the use of body language when speaking, to get over their fear of public speaking. The results suggest that teachers should urge other EFL students to employ this method to get over their fear of speaking in front of groups.

The study by Rahman et al. (2020) was based on the experiences of students at Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University. The results demonstrated that language anxiety could impair students' capacity to communicate ideas clearly during their English presentations, which had a detrimental impact on their outcomes. The students were observed to display lower levels of anxiety and increased focus on the subject matter during their speech presentations, which, in turn, contributed to their ability to communicate more effectively. According to the findings of Alhasan et al. (2023) Jordanian students displayed seven types of anxious behaviors linked to speaking English, which can be categorized into two major psychological groups. These inhibitory patterns include fear of negative evaluation, reluctance to participate and complete coursework, reduced social interactions, concerns about employability, diminished self-confidence, and disorganized thinking. These factors all have negative psychological effects on the process of English oral communication.

Many strategies and methods for lowering EFL students' anxiety levels have been recommended by studies on language anxiety. Language teachers have employed these methods as well as specific classroom procedures to reduce anxiety among a variety of students learning English as a foreign language. Donley (1997) divided these methods into the following four categories: activities and programmes that help students develop their skills, techniques that encourage self-regulation of emotions by bringing them under conscious control, ideas for increasing students' awareness of the nature of language learning and suggestions for lowering anxiety levels in language classes are just a few of the recommendations made. Each of these methods is thoroughly covered below.

## III. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study was used to obtain opinions from HU students on OCA and the coping mechanisms used to deal with this difficulty. This study specifically involved English students from several faculties and departments at the HU in Jordan. The study used a variety of research methods to develop a thorough understanding of the viewpoints of

learners. Interviews were employed as the main or primary method of data collection for the study, with observation serving as backup. According to Creswell and Clark (2017), qualitative research seeks to understand people's thoughts, opinions and impressions of a phenomenon or experience. Studies conducted by qualitative researchers typically take place in unstructured, natural environments because they are more interested in the real world than in controlled laboratory settings. Qualitative research, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), situates the observer in the physical world and entails a variety of interpretive, practical actions that make that world visible.

#### A. *Research Instrument*

Data was gathered through interviews with Jordanian students at Hashemite University. The students were given in-depth questions on the psychological processes that underlie their experience of speaking in English, as well as about the methods they took to reduce and get over any communication obstacles they may have run into, within and outside the classroom. The students were asked to voluntarily participate in a study where they were requested to describe and share the mechanisms and strategies they used to manage the psychological processes that occur after they speak in English in formal and informal settings. In order to break down the apprehensive behaviour into understandable components that would help the researcher develop a pedagogical plan to reduce communication apprehension among future students, the interview questions were specifically created to identify the processes and strategies used by the students themselves to overcome or reduce CA.

#### B. *Data Analysis*

To examine the data, content analysis was used. The audio data were converted into text data, and the main themes and supporting themes were highlighted with particular care (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Highlighting, circling and colouring the themes and sub-themes that were considered to be relevant phenomenological data and might have the ability to serve as helpful explanations was all part of the data coding procedure (Saldana, 2013). Later, the newly formed linguistic categories were reduced down into the themes and sub-themes in the anxious oral communication process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

#### C. *Sample of the Study*

Hashemite University deliberately sought out twelve Jordanian undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines of study to explain the psychological mechanisms and processes underlying their experiences of oral communication apprehension. The hesitant speaking behaviour of the Jordanian students at Hashemite University provided the justification for this purposeful sampling. The relevance of the study and its contribution to bettering language instruction were explained to the participants, who were also given the assurance that they would maintain their anonymity and that they could withdraw whenever they felt it was necessary (Braggs, 2017). Nine students were enrolled in the study overall, after three individuals were dropped from it because they were unwilling to take part. The chosen students represented a variety of academic specialisations.

#### D. *Research Questions*

The following research questions were formed to explore the processes and strategies used by Jordanian undergraduate students at Hashemite University to cope with and reduce their Oral Communication Apprehension.

1. What strategies do the students use to overcome or reduce their level of English-communication apprehension and to enhance their English-speaking proficiency?

### IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

To understand the process, it is necessary to determine the methods that the pupils employed. A technique in this study is defined as an instantaneous conscious reaction made by a participant to deal with oral communication anxiety when communicating in English. After getting the responses from the participants, the strategies were classified based on their similarities. To answer the research question in depth, participants were asked about the strategies that could be used to minimise the levels of OCA. Several themes emerged reflecting the participants' strategies. These themes also reflected the existing strategies identified by professionals as ways of managing high levels of OCA. Although the participants' conceptualisation of the strategies did not exactly match the professionally prescribed methods, they could be aligned with the nature of existing OCA management techniques. Five strategies for coping with OCA emerged from the analysis of the interviews. They are interpersonal interaction, building self-confidence, practice and preparation, external motivation, and faking it.

Five strategies for coping with OCA emerged from the interview data collected. These themes were interpersonal interaction, building self-confidence, practice and preparation, faking it and external motivation.

#### A. *Interpersonal Interaction*

The participants believed that through constant interpersonal interaction, their levels of CA could be reduced. This strategy could be likened to interpersonal communication, which Hartley (1996) defined as a face-to-face or technologically mediated communication, individual to individual, individual to mass audience or group to mass audience. Interpersonal communication involves the way we think, how we view ourselves, the content of our self-talk

and our feelings (Francis, 2007). Evidence from the participants' worldview revealed that Jordanian students in HU devised some interpersonal communication strategies in an effort to reduce CA. A sample of excerpts from the interviews revealed that students volunteer to participate in class activities, such as homework, in order to reduce apprehensiveness.

"I start to volunteer doing homework. Sometimes, I set with friends to find the answers for any questions could be questioned during the class by teacher" (Participant 3).

Similarly, some students adopt the method of presenting before friends and family members as a strategy to reduce CA during presentations in the classroom environment:

"When I have a presentation I ask family members to set [sic] and watch me and sometimes I use mirror" (Participant 7).

"I present in front of my friends and family members" (participant 4).

"I try to reduce the anxiety by trying to participate in classes to be familiar with speaking among friends or people and doing and presentations if needed" (Participant 5).

The foregoing demonstrates that the participants adopt interpersonal communication as a strategy in dealing with CA.

### B. *Self-Confidence*

Another theme emerged from the constructed reality of the interview participants on the strategies used to deal with CA is self-confidence. The students identified the need to be self-confident in order to reduce the level of CA. For instance, the students believed that by building confidence, one can overcome the negative effects of CA during a presentation or group discussion.

Cognitive strategy derived from the participants' responses was positive thinking "self-motivation". In this study, positive thinking means that the participants' used their mind to be confident when communicating in English. Only three participants mentioned that positive thinking encouraged them to motivate themselves to face speaking apprehension perfectly.

The following excerpts from the participants highlight this view:

"We need to learn, we need to stop fearing and anxiety to be familiar with speaking in front others" (Participant 3).

"I try getting myself confident to build new relations with people" (Participant 1).

"You have to trust yourself. Generally, I will face apprehension at the beginning. I have read that if your mind put under threat, you will try to find a way equal that threat to face it. Means (if students being threaten that they will fail or asked to leave the class, they will find a way to face that threat which is forcing themselves to speak)" (Participant 6).

"I have been advised by friend not to hold paper in my hand while presenting as audiences will see my hand shaking" (Participant 2).

This shows that students try to manage the CA experience by developing their self-confidence. By developing confidence in themselves, they believe that they can overcome the feeling of anxiety and nervousness associated with speaking in front of people.

### C. *Practice/Preparation*

One of the most effective strategies for managing CA is preparation. Good preparation prior to a presentation can improve the confidence level of the presenter, as well as reducing the amount of anxiety and uncertainties associated with communication. When one prepares well for a presentation, the likelihood of minimising CA is high. In this study, preparation was employed as a tactic to lessen CA anxiety. Eight out of nine participants (almost all) stated that they used the preparation technique when practising their speaking skills within or outside the classroom, in order to reduce their anxiety. This preparation included listening more, speaking more – whether at home individually or at school in front of close classmates – reading, attending courses and studying hard.

The following excerpts from the interviews highlight the students' narration of the way they apply this strategy to manage their CA experience in different communication contexts.

The participants acknowledged that listening was a crucial step in helping them speak English more effectively and with less anxiety. Six out of the nine participants stated that they did their best to listen. The participants stated that speaking and listening were two of the key coping mechanisms they used to manage their anxiety during conversation.

"I am trying to participate more and more, to prepare myself well before I present any topic I will do. Listen to English news and imitating what I hear" (Participant 3).

"Practice communication is the best. Listen to native speakers' videos will help you knowing the correct pronunciation" (Participant 4).

Another participant (Participant 8) said that he is a certified public speaker and was trained for that, even though he used to train well before presenting a speech.

"I use to prepare myself very well before the events. I have trained by a qualified people on public speech, and I got certified from them to deliver khetab (religion advice and speech)" (Participant 8).

"I practice speaking personally I use to record my voice to listen it later so I can know the weakness area I need to improve. So I do prepare myself to presentations as I have the vocabularies and the words so I use my ideas to present" (Participant 6).

"I prepare myself well, talk to myself before presentation" (Participant 9).

“I am getting improved every time I do it. I am worked on myself...to get myself prepared before presentations by presenting in front of my close friends” (Participant 2).

Another participant described listening to the news. By watching movies or listening to the news, it is possible to expand one’s vocabulary, which is a vital tactic for reducing one’s anxiety. He said,

“Before I present any topic I will do. Listen to English news and imitating what I hear, reading and saving vocabularies” (Participant 3).

Furthermore, a participant mentioned that watching movies and practising speaking before doing the presentation were key strategies for reducing OCA among students. He said, “I use to communicate in English with my family, watching English movies, reading, trying to participate in classes to be familiar with speaking among friends or people and doing and presentations if needed” (Participant 5).

The above narrations demonstrate that students in HU perceived preparation and practice as necessary strategies in managing CA. They indicated preparing oneself through practising either alone, in a group, or before family or friends, and listening and imitating successful speakers, are good strategies for managing CA.

#### *D. External Motivation*

In trying to manage the level of CA, students also resort to external motivation. Some of the interview participants mentioned that they resort to consulting those people they perceive as qualified and trust to improve their English language proficiency, which they believe can help them become less apprehensive whenever they are facing communication scenarios. Some of the interview participants described the strategy in the following ways:

“I used to seek advice and directions from a qualified people whom I respect and trust” (Participant 8).

“...if your mind put under threat, you will try to find a way equal that threat to face it. Means if students being threaten that they will fail or asked to leave the class, they will find a way to face that threat which is forcing themselves to speak” (Participant6).

“I think if the speaking classes became requirements to students’ admission, will force students to take speaking course before enrolling in universities like some universities require ILETS for postgraduates” (Participant 9).

“...if you are familiar with the topic you are dealing with, you will do very well. Expression starts from a thought. If you have the right thought, you will express well. And I use to communicate in English with my family, watching English movies, reading” (Participant 5).

The foregoing comments highlight the use of external motivation as a strategy to manage CA among some of the students interviewed. They observed that external pressure or motivation can force students to learn the English language, which could make them become more proactive in learning the language and, by extension, reduce the level of CA among the students.

This shows that students strive to manage the experience of CA by developing self-confidence. By developing confidence in themselves, they believe that they can overcome the feeling of anxiety and nervousness associated with speaking in front of people.

#### *E. Faking It*

One of the participants said that during presentations, she often utilised her own unique funny strategies and intentionally tried to repeat her words. These strategies she claimed enabled her to compose herself and helped her manage her apprehensiveness, especially during presentations to a large group. This strategy, according to Bragg (2017), is akin to adopting an alternate persona, where a person assumes a certain role or pretends to be confident by faking it during communicative exchanges. The student described how she uses this strategy in the following excerpt:

“I usually have a funny signs like repetition, I repeat the word several times, I don’t know why? I have a cold fingers tip, shaking and etc...mostly, it happened intentionally, but sometimes I use it intentionally to get the idea. And I will take breath” (Participant 6).

The foregoing statement revealed that this student adopted the alternate persona strategy to manage the level of CA she might experience during the course of communication encounters.

### V. DISCUSSION

What strategies are used by Jordanian students at HU to reduce OCA? The research aimed at discovering the various strategies the students in HU used to manage CA during communication encounters. To achieve this objective, the students were asked to describe the various strategies they used to manage CA during communication scenarios. Similarly, they were also asked to recommend strategies which they perceived would help in minimising the experience of CA among students. The literature on CA has identified various strategies that could be used to minimise or control CA, such as corrective feedback and visualisation, among other developed techniques (Bowman, 2018; Bragg, 2017). In the present research, students were asked to comment on the strategies they adopt in managing levels of CA in communication scenarios. The analysis of the results revealed that students adopted some sort of customised techniques to address the problems they experienced with CA. These techniques involved faking it, external motivation, interpersonal interaction, practice and building self-confidence.

To minimise the level of OCA in a communication scenario, students have reported that they voluntarily force themselves to engage in activities and classes that involve other students. Through this strategy, the students believe that they can improve their English language speaking skills, thus minimising their level of OCA.

Similarly, the students reported that they practise presentations before groups of family and friends, so that they can familiarise themselves with the actual presentation scenario, while another student reported that she used to present in front of a mirror in order to create the feelings of the real communication environment. These strategies were aimed at getting the students used to the real scenario in which they would interact with peers or classmates. Previous research also recommends increased interpersonal interaction among the strategies that can help mitigate high levels of CA among students.

The findings also identified how students adopt a faking strategy to deal with any CA situations. The faking strategy involves the student pretending to be confident by assuming a certain role or adopting an alternate persona. Bragg (2017) reported a similar CA mitigation strategy whereby students were found to devise self-calming techniques to minimise CA. Furthermore, the results revealed that students facing CA tried to build up their self-confidence as a strategy for minimising high levels of CA during encounters. They believed that by building up one's self-confidence, one can overcome the negative effects of CA. This result tallied with the findings of a previous piece of research where students that experienced high levels of CA were found to exhibit low apprehension after being coached on building their self-confidence (Choi et al., 2015; Marshall, 1996).

- 1- What strategies and procedures could help students overcome or reduce their level of English-communication apprehension?

The analysis of the interview data showed that students in HU used practice and preparation as techniques to deal with their CA during English language communication encounters. Specifically, they reported having engaged in listening to native English speakers and listening to English news channels, along with constant practice. This strategy is usually adopted when the students are faced with presentations and group discussion scenarios.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the students viewed external motivation as a strategy in managing apprehension during communication encounters. The students' descriptions of this strategy suggest that they believed that if one is forced to speak through the use of external pressure from the instructor or teacher, and threats of being expelled from the class, one could manage his level of CA in this way by adopting a self-calming strategy. This result corresponded with the findings of Bragg (2017), who found that when students were confronted with unavoidable communication scenarios, they adopted self-calming techniques to mitigate the effects of CA. In addition, one of the interviewees expressed the view that being self-confident could be a good strategy for overcoming CA. She believed that when one builds up self-confidence, one can overcome anxiety and deliver a speech effectively. These results are in line with previous studies, such as those of (Almusharraf, 2020; Kristiansen et al., 2019; Liu, 2018; Namaziandost et al., 2019; Vaklifard et al., 2020; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Zamani & Ahangari, 2016).

## VI. CONCLUSION

The research aimed at exploring the strategies used by Jordanian undergraduate students at HU to reduce or overcome their CA. A qualitative research design, using interviews as its data collection strategy, looked at the lived experience of students with CA, with specific reference to their perceived levels of CA, the strategies they used in mitigating CA, and the effects of CA on their academic and social life. The outcome of the research revealed that Jordanian students studying at HU used various strategies to mitigate the extent of CA during communication encounters. They adopt self-help methods, such as faking it, preparation and practice, and building self-confidence in order to minimise the negative effects of CA. The results reveal that when they are confronted with unavoidable communication scenarios, students adopt self-calming techniques to mitigate the effects of CA.

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**Ali Ata Alkhalidi** is Assistant Professor of applied linguistics at the American University of the Middle East, Kuwait. He teaches a variety of ESP/EAP courses. Moreover, he is a reviewer of several international journals. He has published many research papers in international journals, and his main research interests are materials development, creativity, creative writing, academic writing, technical writing, discourse analysis, SLA research, TESOL, ESP/EAP, and SLA theories.

**Rashad Faleh Alhasan** is a PhD student of Applied Linguistics at UUM, Malaysia. He is an English Language Legal Translator / interpreter and EFL instructor at Saif bin Zaid Academy for Police and Security Science. His main research interests are oral communication apprehension and speaking difficulties in English language learning, writing apprehension and translation anxiety.

**Ibrahim Fathi Huwari** received his PhD in Applied Linguistics from Universiti Utara Malaysia. He is currently an Assistant professor at the department of English Language and Literature at Zarqa University, Jordan. His research interest includes language anxiety, writing anxiety/apprehension, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics.

**Hussein Abushaaban** is a researcher who holds a PhD from UUM, Malaysia. His research interests are vocabulary, semantics, English language teaching and translation.